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NATURAL VS. ARTISTIC BEAUTY

GOING back to the beginning of the history of esthetics, we find that Plato's interest in beauty was overshadowingly in that of real being, and that only in a very qualified sense would he concede the works of art to be beautiful at all. So, too, the true founder of modern philosophical esthetics, Kant, approached the esthetic problem primarily from the side of real objects, and only secondarily raised the question of artistic beauty. When we come to Hegel, however, we find the theory of the beautiful expressly identified with that of fine art. And the writer of our only noteworthy English history of esthetics, Bosanquet, follows in the wake of his master, Hegel, and makes the same identification. Indeed, the definition of esthetics as the philosophy of fine art, may be regarded as being, from a variety of influences and reasons not requiring here to be specified, the orthodox and, so to speak, official view to-day. This, perhaps, is what makes its fresh consideration only the more needed. I take the Hegelian statement and justification of it as representative, because with so thorough a philosopher as Hegel, or even Bosanquet, a deliberate defining of esthetics as exclusively or essentially philosophy of fine art, implies an express and thought-out pronouncement touching the relation of these two regions of the beautiful, Nature and Art, and, more particularly, a pronouncement as to their relative rank in beauty. Such a pronouncement we do find in either writer. Clearly its bearing is not merely on our verbal definition of our science, but on how far certain topics need to be enlarged on in our substantive treatment of it, if indeed they require to be introduced at all. Perhaps it is only putting the same thing another way to add that, on the soundness of our conception of the relation of nature and art, will depend whether our esthetics does justice to every phase of actual fact in our experience and ordinary estimation of the beautiful. The purpose of this short paper will be to canvass, for the reason already indicated, the position developed by Hegel and Bosanquet on this question of Nature *versus* Art, and to determine how far it needs to be assented to, and what follows. The consequences, however, whether for the doctrine or history of esthetics, can only be suggested.

Hegel condemns natural beauty to a very inferior place as compared with that of art. For him there is nothing in the former which is not taken up, 'conserved' and enriched in art. Hence the inclusive adequacy of the definition of esthetics as philosophy of fine art. Centrally, this condemnation of nature by Hegel rests upon a proposition fundamental to his own general philosophic standpoint, namely, that truth attains its appropriate and adequate embodiment only in the form of pure (*i. e.*, reflective, subjectively self-conscious) thought. On his view, the sensuous concreteness of the natural object is not an addition to its significant content, but a 'superfluity,'¹ an irrelevant obscuration of its pure essential import. 'All the time,' he says, 'its (the natural object's) truth is contaminated and infected by the immediate sensuous element.'² And since 'The hard rind of nature and the common world give the mind more trouble in breaking through to the idea than do the products of art'—for the reason that these latter relatively abstract away from 'the immediate sensuous element' and 'the hard rind of nature,' and thus make some approach to the purity of thought,—it is evident why the products of art should be rated above nature in significance and beauty. For, of course, the core and substance of beauty lie but in depth and wealth of significance. However, Hegel's contrastings of the expressive powers of nature and art have an interest aside from their technical bases in his system. One might adopt a general philosophical point of view exactly the opposite of the Hegelian, and maintain that as to the amount of meaning somehow *wrapped up* and dynamically efficient in it, the perceptual world indefinitely excels that of thought, the thought-world being an inadequate abstraction and a falsification, which, not one whit the less from the fact of its reaction into and fertilization of perception, forever follows in the rear of the latter; and yet at the same time one might concede that, of the two modes of perceptual presentation, the immediate natural and the artistic, the artistic, from its very approach to the abstractness of reflective thought, was, as Hegel held, of the greater esthetic worth, because it possessed the richer capacity of bringing the wrapped-up content of truth or meaning into relative explicitness. In fact, Hegel's disparagement of nature in her revelatory power as beauty, reaches back, along with the exaggerated abstract intellectualism of his whole system itself, to a deeper root in a general inability, on his part, to appreciate nature as other than a comparatively blind and meagre region. As in his philosophy in the total it is his nature-philosophy which is the weakest section, so

¹ Bosanquet's translation of 'The Introduction of Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art,' p. 16.

² *Ibid.*

in his esthetics it was inevitable that that should show forth as the least impressive part in which demand was made on his sense of nature as a sphere of the beautiful. Bosanquet confesses as much when he feels, at any rate in portions of Hegel's discussion of the natural beautiful, something 'half-hearted,'³ and when he acknowledges that Hegel's concentration of attention upon sharply marked, compact, individual beings in nature, to the comparative neglect of those looser large aggregates and masses such as make landscape, and his progressively higher estimation of the individual existences according as they are inorganic, vegetable or animal, do not correspond to the order of our actual experience. However, Hegel has a reason for depreciating nature, which may appeal without any special reference to a Hegelian rendering of it. The natural object is inferior to the art-product because, unlike the latter, it has not been, he says, 'born—born again, that is—of mind';⁴ or because, as he words it in another place, it 'has not sustained this (the art work's) passage through the mind.'⁵ This want of the new birth in mind may be construed into at least three things. First, since, of course, nature exists for us only as a construct in our own perception, the want intended to be pointed out may be, that mere natural perception does not sufficiently evoke and express the percipient subject, his capacities, ideals and inward reaches of being. Second, the natural object is not, like the product of art, a *deliberate* construction, and therefore is defective in content and import. Third, whatever may be the *presence* of the mind in nature, it can not there feel thoroughly *aware* of itself, and hence *at home* and *free*.

The contention that in natural (immediate) perception the content and nature of mind are but imperfectly exhibited, is entirely in keeping with Hegel's general doctrine that the advance towards pure thought is an advance in completeness of content and rationality in the sense that all release from admixture of irrelevancy and confusion is a positive progress towards adequacy and completedness. But for those of us who are loath to write down the sensuous body as a contingent and expressionless contamination of mind, the question does not turn on this point of relative purity and appropriateness in the mind's different modes of manifestation. It takes instead this form: Is the mind in its whole *extent* of resources projected into its direct, natural perceptual constructs? What does modern psychology say, with its doctrine of 'apperception,' and its declaration that in every experience, every object set

³ Bosanquet, 'History of Æsthetics,' p. 338; cf. also p. 337.

⁴ Bosanquet, translation of 'Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art,' p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

by the mind before itself, are brought to bear and embodied the mind's *whole* organized capacity and content? If there is any deficiency in the mind's self-projection in natural perception, clearly it must be in that lack of *self-awareness* on the mind's part which, in this form of experience, we must cheerfully acknowledge. But how radical this lack is, and what compensations it may or may not carry with it, have not yet been settled.

Does the fact that nature is not a deliberate creation of the mind make her inevitably a region of profound unconsciousness, with her meaning hopelessly deeper sunk in implicitness than is the case in art? We need, in the first instance, to recall that the deliberateness of art is of a very peculiar sort, or rather that it is a commonplace of even the most ordinary opinion that essentially art is not deliberate at all. The creative process may be deliberately initiated, as we might initiate our looking at a landscape; or even it may be possible that by a mere reflective cleverness and judgment we lay down certain broad outlines and a provisional rough sketch of the path our creation is to take; but for the rest we require the whole essential life and quality of the work to be the outcome of intuition, inspiration, unconsciousness. Still, that the intent of the whole process is precisely to render meanings more *felt*—in some sense then more nearly explicit than they are in the immediate presentation of nature—can not be denied. On the other hand, is it inevitably the case that in the natural object the mind can not find itself and feel at home and 'free'? This brings us directly to our third count in the supposed inferiority of nature, namely, that however much of meaning may be *buried away* in the natural object, the mind can not there be *aware* of it, and therefore find itself, as in the product of fine art. This really is the very problem of our whole paper itself; but, before we undertake to settle it, we have to determine what we are going to include under the object of nature. Here Bosanquet, in support of the Hegelian condemnation of nature and restriction of esthetics to fine art, brings forward a theory of what constitutes nature esthetically considered, which we must make our reckoning with, not the less because it is so sophisticated a conception. It will be found quite in accord with Hegel's own declaration that for the judging of natural beauties there is no adequate norm of standard.⁶

Bosanquet develops at considerable length⁷ the argument, that by natural beauty is to be understood only such beauty as exists for the untrained perception of the average man. He explains by drawing a comparison with the world of knowledge. Natural

⁶ Bosanquet, transl. of 'Intro. to Hegel's *Æsth.*,' p. 5.

⁷ 'History of *Æsthetics*,' pp. 3, 4.

beauty corresponds to that informal, unsifted, unorganized knowledge, so called, which belongs to the man in the street; whereas to the critical, clarified, orderly, *recorded* knowledge of the trained man of science, corresponds the beauty which the artist reveals and *preserves* for us in the world about us. Bosanquet speedily drops the restriction that recording and permanence enter essentially into beauty; and concedes that "it is a blunder to imagine that there is no art where there is no 'work of art'"; which of course it is, just as it would be to assert that there is no science where it is not written down in a book. But, furthermore, is the contrast between science and art on the one hand, and common sense and natural beauty on the other, itself just? Granted that science and art are alike 'interpretations' of nature; but does it follow that developed acumen and insight can be exercised only in the artificial region of the laboratory or studio? Surely we do not have to conclude that actual, direct, so to speak out-of-door contact with nature just as she comes, inevitably remains at the vulgar level of her, while the mind capable of deeper thought and deeper appreciation moves on to some more exalted region than just nature herself? The most gifted scientist may bring his subtlest powers to bear in his mere plain looking, or plainest judging, and this for him will be his common sense; and so the most exquisite artistic endowment may be called into play in contemplation of solid matter-of-fact objects, and these do not thereby cease being natural. Bosanquet concedes such a finer use of perception, but would, however, describe nature lifted to this level as in reality art: the actual perception of the man of artistic genius is itself a creation of art. This is a needless perversion of terms in the interest of an arbitrary definition and limitation of esthetics. It may be true that common sense and mere natural perception both constitute descriptions of the world; however, they are not, by the naïve consciousness, appreciated as such. To the latter, they are an immediate experience of the *presence* of the *fact* itself; and precisely herein differentiated from those *deliberate*, *sophisticated* describings called science and art. Why not retain this useful distinction, and call by the name of nature all beauty whatsoever, no matter by whom experienced, which is gotten through out-and-out unspoiled *presentation*? Natural beauty thus conceived—which is the conception in all ordinary talk or discussion—would not be without a norm of measurement; the norm would be the testimony of the most competent judges, precisely as it is in art. Such a natural beauty, too, might at last stand some chance of rivalry with that of art. For it might possibly, in certain circumstances, exhibit characteristics and superiorities of its own—not simply be 'included,' as the Hegelians hold, within the beauty of art. Whether

under such natural beauty should be embraced actual human personalities and spiritual traits, or even human bodies, need not now trouble us, though I can see no valid reason why these facts of actual *nature* should not be counted among the beauties of nature.

I am not going to maintain an absurdity. I am not tempted to minimize the real vocation of art. In part, no doubt, its business is, as Hegel and Bosanquet both point out, to record and give permanence to the otherwise fleeting in esthetic experience; in part, too, merely to disseminate, publish notable scenes and situations which, as immediate spectacles, are accessible to only a small public. But neither of these comparatively lowly functions, much less any delight men take in technique and cleverness of imitations, would explain the mighty part art has played in the history of culture. Its prime and characteristic business is precisely that of releasing import out of the tangle and confusion of the actual world. But does this imply that nature always and everywhere is confused and tangled? May not a percipient of genius, approaching a mountain, or the sea, or a noble human figure, in the proper mood, find in the immediate presence of it a satisfaction and significance at least as deep and convincing as any he could get from an artistic rendering of the same object? Does nature never strike us as at least as 'perfect' as art? Does the painter of a sunset or of a human face always 'idealize,' and never content himself humbly to transcribe, and preserve and publish? If the natural object suffers to some degree from a lack of abstract directness in the 'idea' of it, may not this want be more than compensated for in the object's very fuller concreteness? For why need the concreteness of it be an irrelevancy and a distraction? Why may not, rather, the very unexplored outskirts of it dartle prophetic gleams and hints of import, and charge the mind full of a sense of meaning 'deeply interfused'? Moreover, if we are not disciples of the gospel that the natural habitat of mind is amid abstractions, but instead regard them as part of the fall from Eden, and part of the penance through which the Garden is to be won again, the more liberal concreteness of nature, where we truly do not find ourselves bewildered by it, ought only to give us a more inspired, or at least a more securely easeful, sense of at-homeness. So, too, the sensuous integrity of the natural object ought to lend it some of that impression of solidity which the sense of the real massiveness of the materials employed imparts as a legitimate esthetic effect to the art of architecture.

There is, however, a superiority of nature over art much more obvious than any of these. I might designate it as that which arises from nature's greater *scope*—scope in *magnitude*, and as to *variety*. An incontestable part of the esthetic power of a vast natural pan-

orama or event, as a hundred-mile front of grand snow-capped peaks, or an earthquake, lies in its very size and might, which art absolutely can not reproduce. Or if it be contended that poetry is able imaginatively to summon it before us, then in the merely imaginative form it lacks that penetrative intensity which, so long as it hinders none others, is a genuine esthetic quality.

But, lastly, and beyond all others, nature has the advantage of being *real*. In saying this, I know that I not only brush aside the Hegelian attempt to demonstrate that at bottom it is the 'Idea' and not the living flesh-and-blood being that seizes our deep attention,—if only we will be philosophically enlightened,—but am, apparently, running counter to the whole established tradition of esthetics. Beauty, it is agreed on all hands, must be a disinterested experience. Granted; yet in our anxiety over the old perversion of beauty to moralism and didactics, are we not going to an opposite absurd extreme of abstraction? Are we not, in greater or less measure, still following in the wake of Kant, when, to make sure against any admixture of the intellectual or ethical interest, he set up a 'pure' beauty, which, strictly, would have been a matter of blind feeling and unrealizable, and over against that an 'impure' beauty, of which sort, consistently speaking, all actual beauty was, and, paradoxically, dignified and appealing just in the measure that it was impure? The mind's esthetic responses can not thus, can not at all, be cut off from the intellectual and ethical. The experience is named solely according to its center of gravity, according as the phase of esthetic, intellectual, or ethical reaction is in the ascendent. But now, if in the so-called esthetic experience you preserve the true esthetic center, the primacy of the esthetic moment, what else than pure gain in getting the largest possible injection of the intellectual and moral appreciation, the largest possible accompanying consciousness also of these values, calling out, in short, the whole man, instead of some pale, unreal, mincing part of him? It is trying this last that ends in estheticism, art-for-art's sake, and the whole train of kindred fallacies and degeneracies. On the other hand, if you will, reality is itself a factor in rational wholeness. It is, doubtless, this reality which at bottom gives, if nothing else, that superior sense of solidity which we spoke of above as accompanying the fuller sensuous concreteness of the natural object. The natural object has an advantage, then, even esthetically, in being real.

What are some of the consequences to esthetics from our argument here? We allowed ourselves space for only a word on this point. If theory would concede what every lover of nature is altogether persuaded of, and recognize that natural beauty is not of necessity in every instance only an inferior, inchoate form of the

same thing that art renders in more perfect shape, it might discover that natural beauty had some differentiating characteristics and superiorities of its own, such as we have been suggesting, and might find it worth its while to investigate these, in the interest of a sounder discrimination in its treatment of the beauty of art itself. Out of such a procedure might issue even such a thing as a completer insight into the whole final mission and upshot of art, for instance, if it could be shown that the end of art is not to lead us away from nature, but to mediate nature for us, bringing us ever from a lower, blinder level of nature ultimately back to nature on a higher, more intelligible plane. This alone would be worth while; but there might, perchance, further come to pass even that which Hegel declares no one has taken it into his head to try, namely, a systematic account of the beauties of nature, *as distinctively natural*.⁸ These two or three things would surely bring about a juster balance than must seem to prevail in our discussions of the subject of beauty generally: even the layman could now appreciate that the frontiers of our theory of the beautiful run impartially with those of the kingdom of beauty itself. Finally, there would be some readjustment of perspective in the writing of the history of esthetics. To take but one instance, the historians of esthetics would not then fall into the distortion of envisaging all that Plato says on the subject of beauty from the point of view of its least valuable portion, namely, his utterances on poetry and the arts; but would start rather from the indefinitely weightier part of his reflections, that which has to do with 'real' beauty. Plato would then loom up in very altered proportions in the work of a writer like Schasler, and even Bosanquet would estimate some points quite differently. Other consequences could be indicated, but the above will suffice to illustrate our thought.

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THE POSSIBILITY OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION OF FREEDOM.

IN contemporary discussions of freedom the general point of departure is the definition of freedom as a practical truth or a social necessity. That is, the ethical, political, institutional and industrial conditions of to-day vitally demand on the part of each individual a sense of his own responsibility in the social order, and this consciousness of responsibility, it is held, implies an accom-

⁸ Has not the work of men like Ruskin suggested that there might be richer possibilities in such an undertaking than Hegel cared to promise it?